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*Religion, Secularism,
and Ethnicity in
Contemporary
Nepal*

edited by

David N. Gellner

Sondra L. Hausner

Chiara Letizia

रवि शाक्य, इखाछै, यल

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**STATE RITUALS IN A SECULAR STATE?
REPLACING THE NEPALESE KING IN THE
PACALI BHAIRAVA SWORD PROCESSION AND
OTHER RITUALS**

Astrid Zotter

FOLLOWING THE LAST NEPALESE KING'S political defeat in 2006 there was a broad political consensus to abolish monarchy as to the country's political framework and disestablish Hinduism as the state religion.¹

¹ I wish to express my gratitude to Mahes Raj Pant for referring me to the incident of the Pacali Bhairava Sword Procession and providing me with the newspaper coverage thereof. Furthermore I am indebted to Ritu Shrestha Bajracharya for her help in understanding the Newari sources, to Manik Bajracharya, David Gellner, Chiara Letizia, Alexis Sanderson, and Christof Zotter for their comments and corrections. The use of diacritics has been limited as far as seemed useful. The transcription follows pronunciation, that is, silent *a-* is not transcribed in the case of the vernaculars. Unless indicated as being Newari (Nw.) or Nepali (Np.), foreign words are Sanskrit. The paper shares facts and argumentation with another article where I have reflected on the ousting of the Nepalese king from royal rituals as an example of the denial of ritual (Zotter 2016).

Consequently, Nepal was declared a secular republic. Announcing this fundamental change of the political system was simple; adapting monarchical institutions, particularly rituals maintained by the Hindu state, was a much more difficult task. A particular challenge was posed by those rituals that featured the king's prominent public presence and constructed him as the legitimate ruler. Rather than abandoning them as part of an outdated polity, many of these rituals continue to be financed and staged as state affairs.

The major strategy for implementing political change in these rituals was to permit the new head of state to act in place of the king. As will be shown in the first part of this chapter, this scheme follows a historical model that was set when Nepal became a territorial state in the eighteenth century. As the example of Pacali Bhairava's Sword Procession of 2011 illustrates, this is not the only option proposed and enacted in reorganizing royal practices. This incident, introduced in the second part, also attests to ongoing public debate about the place of rituals in a secular state.

PARTICIPATION, REPRESENTATION, AND REPLACEMENT OF RULERS IN PUBLIC RITUALS

Providing the context for the main example dealt with below, in the following section I will take a general look at publicly performed royal rituals and at their role in the power structures of the Kathmandu Valley. In the discussion of the nexus between divine and human rule as advanced in times of monarchy, special focus will lie on the dynastic break of 1768/69, when Prithvi Narayan Shah, king of Gorkha, conquered the Valley and deprived the Malla kings of their power. Kings of the latter dynasty had been reigning there for the past centuries over a predominantly Newari-speaking population, first (from ca. 1200) from the city of Bhaktapur, and then, from the late fifteenth century onwards, in three more or less independent city-kingdoms. Ever since the Shah conquest, two ritual cultures have co-existed in the Valley and have competed for prestigious patronage: the one of the Newars with their dual religious elites (Vajrayana Buddhists and Shaivite Hindus), and that of the Parbatiyas (also called Bahuns, and Chhetris). The new rulers favoured the religious forms of the latter, that is, of their own group, over those of the former, but they

also accepted many of the Mallas' royal rituals into their ceremonial schedule.² The emergence of the main pattern for the recent republican remodelling of once royal rituals will be considered against this historical background.

The selection of the various ritual examples discussed will buttress my main argument. These examples are either about the central ritual concept—that a king's rule depends on his *shakti* ('might' or 'regal power')—or are taken from the same festival complex to which the Sword Procession belongs, that is, the autumnal Navaratra or Durga Puja. All over South Asia, this festival has been the major occasion for celebrating the relationship of the king and his Goddess. In Nepal, too, it has formed a climax of the festival cycle for both dynasties and ritual cultures in question.³

The Malla and the Shah Periods

Like Hindu monarchs elsewhere, the Malla and after them the Shah kings were regarded as the ritual anchor points of their realms, around which interaction between divine and human inhabitants unfolded. The king himself was considered a deity.⁴ In accord with transregional Tantric theology his capacity to rule depended on his *shakti* (Gombrich and Gupta 1986). The latter should not be thought of as an abstract concept or impersonal force. The *shakti* manifests itself in the king's human queen, but above all in his tutelary goddess.

² A more detailed study of this shift of royal patronage for selected temples and festivals, as well as of the reworking of rituals together with the redistributions of rights and duties to ritual specialists, is the subject of my current research (from January 2014) as part of the project 'Historical Documents of Pre-modern Nepal', within the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities.

³ This festival is commonly referred to as either Nw. Mahani/Mohani/Mvahnī (related to Skt. Mahanavami) or as Np. Dasain (related to Skt. Dashara). For Navaratra in various Nepalese settings, see Krauskopf and Lecomte-Tilouine (1996a).

⁴ In medieval Nepal the king was conceived of as Bhairava (van den Hoek 2004: 64; Toffin 1993: 51–72). Like other Hindu kings the Shahs were regarded as incarnations of Vishnu. For the relation of the king towards other human gods, see Burghart (2008: 193–225).

As 'public narratives'⁵ from Nepal vividly illustrate, she needs to be treated with utmost respect, gets upset easily, and may even abandon the king for good (for examples, see further). Nepalese royal ritual, furthermore, may be described as an interweaving of publicly enacted practices with esoteric ones. In both forms the king held a key position. He was both the foremost ritual patron (*yajamāna*) and the premier Tantric practitioner (*sādhaka*) of his kingdom. This system was in operation under both the Malla and the Shah rulers, even if the special configurations of the inner and outer circles of the performed religion were repeatedly subject to reconfiguration.

Processions (Np./Nw. *jātrā*) and dance performances (Nw. *pyākham*), in which deities—either as material representations or embodied in humans—appear in public space, have been vital to the ritual system of the Kathmandu Valley for centuries (Toffin 2010), especially so for royal religion and the enactment of the relationship of the king with the deities of his realm. These public rituals were not only patronized⁶ by royals, but some of them even featured the kings' regular participation. In them the use of a sword (*khadga*) to represent an absent ruler appears to have become an established pattern by the end of the Malla period.⁷ And as such the Malla kings' presence has been visibly performed throughout the reign of the succeeding dynasty up to the present day (see Figure 8.1).⁸

⁵ With this term I wish to designate stories told in the dynastical chronicles (*vaṃśāvalī*)s, written in the nineteenth century, and their parallels in oral accounts. I use these narrations to make sense of historical events and I examine how they are employed in current discourses on ritual, leaving the question of their 'facticity' aside.

⁶ Innumerable documents attest to royal endowments for the maintenance of festivals, the institutions of which are usually attributed to a king of the Malla or an earlier dynasty.

⁷ See, for example, Locke (1980: 263 n. 24) for the presence of the Patan king's sword during the bathing of Red Matsyendranath. Shrestha (2012: 456–7) cites a document stating that in 1750 King Jaya Prakash of Kathmandu, who could not attend the festival of Vajrayogini in person, sent a sword in his place.

⁸ Each of the three Malla kings' swords leads its own ritual life in the twenty-first century. In Patan the current custodian, Bhaiya Lal Manandhar, attends all major festivities of the old realm carrying the sword on his shoulder.

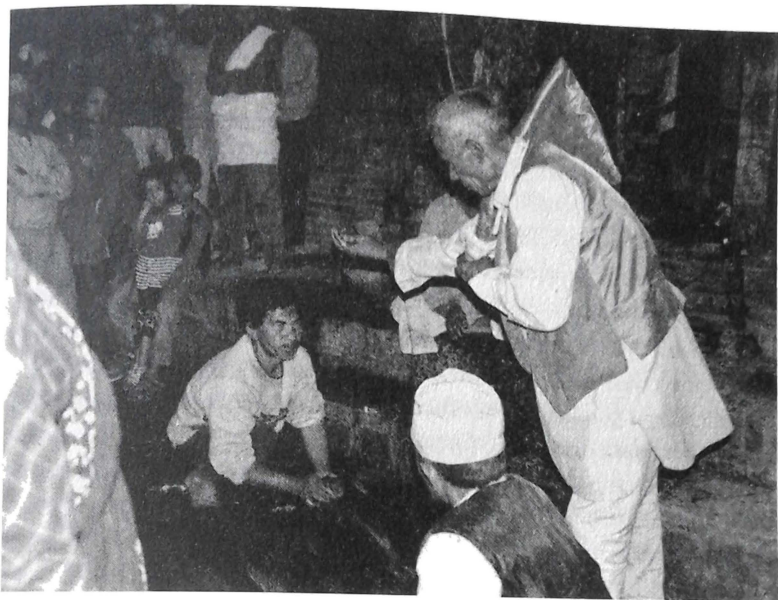


Figure 8.1 In Patan Bhaiya Lal Manandhar, the present custodian of the Malla kings' sword, attends all major festivities of the former kingdom carrying the royal *khadga* on his right shoulder. He carries out the function of the *yajamana* when buffaloes are sacrificed in Mul Chowk on the ninth day of the autumnal Durga Puja.

Source: A. Zotter, 20 October 2007.

A sword, which is also the pivotal element in the Sword Procession (treated below), is a material object that fits well into the Nepalese construct of interlinking exotericism and esotericism. It might even be regarded as a crystallization point in which the king and his goddess, the exoteric and the esoteric traditions, come together. Furthermore, it can be ritually performed in public without disclosing esoteric identities.⁹ A sword does not only represent the (absent) king, it is also one of his main paraphernalia.¹⁰ Likewise, the sword is not only

⁹ Another material object almost unlimited in its scope of interpretations is the *kalasha*, the flask or jar, which in many instances serves as a permanent or temporary vessel for deities.

¹⁰ A sword features centrally on Nepalese royal seals and coins. It is displayed in the royal arms of the Shah Kings.

an attribute of the king's tutelary deity in her different forms, it is the goddess herself, both on esoteric and exoteric levels.¹¹ In the latter case it is the sword of Durga, a goddess, who in a comparative perspective is the first and foremost exoteric form a royal *shakti* may take. On the occasion of the vernal or autumnal Navaratra festivities swords as instruments of sacrifice and royal weapons receive special worship (Krauskopff and Lecomte-Tilouine 1996b: 35–6). This holds also good for both ritual cultures of the Kathmandu Valley. Regarding the Parbatiyas' animal sacrifices on this occasion Oldfield reports "the belief that it is to the favour of the sword that they owe their prosperity" (1880: 344). In the Newars' Navaratra practices a sword is honoured during the main festivities from the eighth to the tenth day, both in domestic and royal forms.¹²

The goddess exoterically displayed as Durga encompasses many esoteric versions; she has been worshipped by different kings under various names and in many forms.¹³ The dynastic chronicles abound

¹¹ To this day the goddess under the name of Siddhilakshmi is worshipped esoterically as a sword installed in a room on the ground floor of the Taleju temples, at least in Bhaktapur (Shrestha 2003: 60 n. 50) and Patan (personal observation, 10 March 2013). This is corroborated by textual evidence, where Siddhilakshmi is "summoned into her Maṇḍala for worship as 'the goddess of the king's mantra present in and as the sword' (*khaḍgasthā, khaḍgarūpiṇī*)" (Sanderson 2007: 295).

¹² For example, handbooks feature the installation of the sword (*khaḍgasthāpana*) on the eighth (Mahāṣṭamī), the sacrifice to the sword (*khaḍgabhogapūjā*) on the ninth (Mahānavamī), and the procession of the sword (*khaḍgajātrā*) on the tenth (Vijayadaśamī). For the domestic rites see, for example, the Asha Saphu Kuthi ms. no. 116 (cf. Pradhan 1986: 292–302; Levy 1990: 523–63); for the royal form NGMPP B 132/21, B 132/23 (cf. Pradhan 1986: 307–12; Toffin 1996; Vajracharya 1976: 185–8). Given the centrality of the sword in Durga Puja and, moreover, its visual presence in public places where it is found depicted on the outer walls and doors of many Newar temples, it is perhaps no coincidence that the Newar nationalist Nepa Rastriya Party, which won one seat in each of the two national elections of 2008 and 2013, has chosen the *khaḍga* as its election symbol.

¹³ In the dynastic chronicles of the nineteenth century, the Malla kings' main goddess is mostly referred to as Taleju (or Tulaja Bhavani). There are, however, other goddesses residing in the palaces, such as Maneshvari or

in stories about competition between Malla kings over the provision of proper service to the royal deity Taleju, about the transmission and loss of her mantra, and so on. For example, it is related that, at the point of scission of the Malla kingdom in the late fifteenth century, Ratna receives the mantra to arouse the tutelary deity, instead of his elder brother Raya, and is ordered by the goddess in a dream to take her, with her sword (*khadga*) and shield, away from Bhaktapur. After bringing the sword to Kantipur (Kathmandu), he establishes himself as an independent ruler (Sharma 1968–9 II: 5).

Thus the transfer of the tutelary deity, of the *shakti* of the realm, is regarded as fundamental for establishing Kathmandu as new royal seat of the Mallas. Another strategy to secure the approval of the *shakti* of the realm is recounted in connection with the next major shift of power. When, in 1768, Kathmandu was made the capital of the Shah dynasty the annual celebration of Indra Jatra seems to have been strategically chosen for the overthrow of the city; at least this is what the accounts of the event available to us suggest.¹⁴

Virtually every history textbook in the country recounts how, when Prithvi-Narayan Shah entered Kathmandu during the annual Kumari festival, he first received *prasad* from the goddess and then decreed that the festival should continue. It is this event that above all is represented as conferring legitimacy on the new dynasty—a symbolic act of great importance still repeated annually when the King comes to receive his *tika* from Kumari. (Allen 1975: 8)

Regardless of what exactly happened, the narration of Prithvi Narayan's 'conquest by ritual' may be called one of the foundation myths of modern Nepal, which was regularly referenced in official rhetoric and was re-enacted annually. Nepalese founding narratives

Duimaju (Toffin 1996: 59–80). Among the different esoteric identities with which the royal goddesses were invested in the textual tradition, Kubjika and Siddhilakshmi are the most prominent (Sanderson 2003–4: 366–72). The relations between these names and forms, which may shift depending on context, still need to be studied.

¹⁴ This festival of royal significance (Toffin 2010) is held around the full-moon day of the month of Bhadra, usually corresponding to the September full moon.

do not invoke a collective endeavour or common identity, as national myths elsewhere often do, but present the king as the central figure in nation-building. It was the king who 'united' Nepal and it was the king who, later, in the period of the Shah restoration, was represented as the spearhead of democracy and development. The persuasive power of this narrative thread was so effective that even the Nepalese Maoists in their war rhetoric embarked upon ruler-centred storytelling and presented their leaders as the true heirs of the early Shah kings (Lecomte-Tilouine 2004: 17–18).

It has been pointed out by Burghart that Prithvi Narayan receiving the blessing of his adversary's tutelary deity was not an isolated incident but part of a strategy followed by the Shah rulers in conquering rival kingdoms. With the "displacement of the vanquished king from the worship at his royal shrine" (Burghart 2008: 221, n. 30), the new rulers were able to establish a direct relationship with the "territorial and ancestral deities whose claims to the territory pre-dated and transcended the transient claims of kings" (Burghart 2008: 220). This severing of the ritual bond between former kings and their deities, which may be viewed as the template for the contemporary replacement of the last Shah King, is notably different from the strategy of Ratna Malla noted above. Whereas the latter took his family's tutelary deity with him from Bhaktapur to newly independent Kathmandu, the former integrated Kathmandu into his territory by stepping into the ritual shoes of his predecessor.

Thus the Mallas' (as other local kings') royal rituals not only continued to be performed, they became meaningful for another king.¹⁵ This implied a more thorough remodelling of the rulers' ritual parts. Though the Mallas and their descendants were denied personal access to rituals, they were and are still represented by their swords. Some of their ritual roles, however, were personally adopted by the Shah kings.

The public appearance of the king was charged with meaning. On such occasions the human ruler publicly enacted his relationships with the deities of the realm, by whom he was blessed and on whose

¹⁵ The Shah Kings seem to have taken over the royal patronage of rituals in Kathmandu Valley more or less in its entirety (Burghart 2008: 220–1; Locke 1980: 321; Toffin 1996: 83).

divine sanction his faith depended. Festivals with royal participation were public reconfirmations of power, "reinforcement rituals" as Mocko (2012) calls them. At the same time they carried the potential to challenge the king's right to rule, as ritual mistakes were and are interpreted as foretelling misfortune; prominent examples are irregularities in the Kumari's blessing of the king (Anderson 1971: 135) or accidents in the chariot procession of the Red Matsyendranath (Emmrich 2006: 36–41). Deities are thus invested with the awareness of imminent ruptures of human rule or are even presented as the ones who trigger this change. Narrations of ritual mistakes or of rulers' dreams, in which the deities disclose their will, are particularly frequent when it comes to the dynastic break of the eighteenth century. For example, it is related that when the troupe of dancers incarnating the Nine Durgas came to the palace on the tenth day of the autumnal Durga Puja, the Bhairava dancer handed his blessings to a young royal guest, the prince Prithvi Narayan Shah of nearby Gorkha, instead of to Ranjit Malla, the king of Bhaktapur (Wright 1877: 198). Similarly, the royal Kumari of Kathmandu announced to the last Malla ruler of Kathmandu, Jaya Prakash, in a dream that she had chosen Prithvi Narayan to rule (Pradhan 1986: 410).¹⁶ These stories may be taken as illustrating Burghart's remarks on the way divine claims to territory transcend human ones. In such stories deities—and, one must add, rituals—bridge the gaps between the reigns of individual kings and even dynasties, and thus guarantee the continuity of legitimate human rule.

Public royal rituals were more than just an occasion for reaffirming (or challenging) the king's right to rule. These performances provided rare but regular moments at which the king, a (semi-) divine broker between deities and humans, became more or less accessible, and at least visible, to his subjects. So his annual public appearances, which went along with a lavish financial, personal, and material support, elevated some rituals over others. The effect of such an upgrading becomes obvious when comparing ritual institutions before and after

¹⁶ This is remembered as Jaya Prakash's motivation to start performing an annual procession in honour of the goddess, but he only delayed the deity's decision to abandon the Malla king. For Matsyendranath's awareness of the dynastic change, see Wright (1877: 197–8).

the dynastic break. The royal Kumari of Kathmandu was raised in importance because of her yearly encounter with the Shah King, whereas the significance of the Kumaris of Patan and Bhaktapur, who had important ritual functions in the once independent Malla kingdoms, diminished (Allen 1975: 8). Thus city rituals of Kathmandu—and, to a lesser extent, of Patan¹⁷—acquired privileged positions because they featured the reigning king acting in public.

The Shah kings did not simply take over rituals from the previous dynasty, they also continued performing those inherited from their forefathers, and they, as well as their Rana prime ministers,¹⁸ made additions to existing rituals. Leaving old ritual elements and specialists in place, festivals were supplemented with new sequences and actors.

The royal practices around the Phulpati (Np.) provide a good example of the expansion of ritual elements.¹⁹ In accordance with prescriptions from the transregional Sanskrit tradition, nine goddesses are summoned into a bundle of nine plants (or *phulpati*) on the seventh day of Dasain and are established as forms of Durga in the place of worship.²⁰ Under the Mallas, if performed at all, this element seems

¹⁷ The king habitually attended only two rituals in Patan, namely, the festival of Krishna's birthday on the dark eighth of the month Bhadra at the Krishna temple in Mangal Bazaar and the Bhoto festival in Jawalakhel. For Bhaktapur, see below.

¹⁸ It seems to have been only under the Ranas (1857–1951) that prominent military parades and displays of weapons on the Tundikhel were introduced (Pfaff-Czarnecka 1993) as part of a broader scheme of politics, featuring among other elements the erection of statues in military attire (Toffin 2008) and neoclassical architecture (Weiler 2009). Along with this went the imposition of a monopoly of access to Western commodities, which set the ruling aristocracy apart from the commoners (cf. Mocko 2012: 72). The Tundikhel has remained the most prestigious and most sought-after stage for performing rituals and festivals. It seems that to have a ritual performed on the Tundikhel confers recognition on a national scale (see, for example, the contribution by Holmberg to this volume)

¹⁹ On Phulpati, see Mocko (2012: 404–6), van den Hoek (2004: 107), Krauskopff and Lecomte-Tilouine (1996b: 20–3), Lecomte-Tilouine and Shrestha (1996: 154–8), Vajracharya (1976: 186).

²⁰ For the 'introduction of the nine leaves' (*navapatrikāpraveśa*), a Durga Puja element most probably of east Indian provenance, see Sarkar (2012).

to have been a rather insignificant part of the royal Durga Puja.²¹ In the Shah period, however, it became one of the highlights of the whole festival complex. The bundle of plants was brought from Gorkha to Kathmandu.²² At the parade ground (the Tundikhel), a military parade takes place, as a "salute to the Phulpati" (Np. Phulpatibadain). This parade, which probably started under the Ranas, is traditionally presided over by the Commander-in-Chief of the Army.²³ While the parade is taking place the bundle of plants is escorted to Hanuman Dhoka, the old Malla palace, where it is established in a special room, the Dasain Ghar. As van den Hoek (2004: 107) has stressed, agency in handling the Phulpati rests entirely with the Parbatiya Brahmins, whereas the worship of Taleju, the tutelary deity of the Mallas, is the exclusive domain of initiated Newar specialists. Taleju is brought down from her temple to the Mulchok on the morning of the day the Phulpati arrives, but is worshipped behind closed doors. The worship of the Phulpati is carried out simultaneously and in a similar fashion in the temple of the tutelary deity of the Shahs in the Gorkha palace (Unbescheid 1996: 116–19).

The lavish staging of the worship of the Phulpati in the Shah period may be interpreted as overshadowing what had been a more central part of the Navaratra celebration of the Malla dynasty. In this context it seems noteworthy that the Shah kings approached the *shakti* of their predecessors in the form of Kumari, but were never initiated into the

²¹ The only references for the Malla period that I am aware of, that is, mentions of *patrasthāpana* in a journal (*thyāsaphu*) and in a compendium on annual rituals (*varṣakṛīya*)- are given by Vajracharya (1976: 186 n. 2, 187 n. 1). So far I have not been able to trace any reference to it in the royal handbooks on Navaratra, nor have I found evidence for it in the domestic Navaratra practices of the Newars.

²² In 2015 it was reported by Nepalese TV channels that for the first time the bundle had not been brought from Gorkha due to the scarcity of petrol.

²³ In the Rana period the prime minister was probably the most important agent in the military welcome of the Phulpati. For a vivid description of the activities of Juddha Shumsher J.B. Rana on the Tundikhel in 1939, see Filchner and Marathe (1953: 32–5). After King Tribhuvan (ruled 1911–55) had reclaimed the position of the Commander-in-Chief of the army in 1951 (Lecomte-Tilouine 2004: 17), the king was the major person acting on the Tundikhel. For the republican recast, see pp. 279, 281.

Taleju cult; instead they continued worshipping the Kalika of Gorkha as their tutelary deity. But even if the Shah kings may personally have kept some distance from the esoteric forms of Durga cherished by the Mallas, they still financed them and in return profited from them by receiving *prasad* (offerings blessed by the deity) from the hands of the main Taleju priest (van den Hoek 2004: 107). The ritual idiom of the preceding dynasty was not rejected, but the worship of Taleju was denied the centrality it once possessed; the action of the Shah king focused instead on the Phulpati just a few metres away.²⁴ By reworking the practices carried out at Hanuman Dhoka on the seventh day of Dasain, the Gorkhalis not only shifted the accent of the rituals, but could also link the *shakti* worshipped in the palace of Gorkha and the one residing in the Mallas' palace. The introduction of the Phulpati conveys a message of domination over a competing ritual culture. By contrast, the identification of the goddesses Kalika and Taleju as both being forms of Durga can be seen as a statement of the inclusion of the earlier dynasty's deity. Similarly, involvement in the festival of Red Matsyendranath in Patan gave the new rulers the chance to link this important deity of the Valley with their own protective deity, Gorakhnath (Locke 1980: 341).

The list of public appearances of the Shah kings, as before in the case of the Mallas, was never static or fixed. Reductions²⁵ and additions are attested. For example, it was only in 1988 that King Birendra started visiting the house of the Nava Durga dance troupe in Bhaktapur on the full moon after and, to some extent, as a conclusion to, the Navaratra celebrations (P. Shrestha 2003: dedication, 116–18).

²⁴ In this light, I would at least qualify what Pfaff-Czarnecka has noted on the development of Durga Puja, that is, that the “expansion of the Dasain Festival [under Shah and Rana rule] goes along with the increasing importance of Durgā worship in the Kathmandu Valley at the expense of the cult of Kumārī and Taleju” (1993: 273). The rituals for sure have been diverted away from Taleju, the lineage goddess of the old dynasty, but I would hesitate to see them shifting to Durga, or, in other words, to the exoteric sphere. Instead, the changes might be conceived of as more complex reconfigurations of both exoteric and esoteric Navaratra practices.

²⁵ For example, in the Matsyendra festival (Locke 1980: 325; Mocko 2012: 318–20).

Without further research it cannot be said with any certainty how far the annual ceremonial schedule of the Shah kings, as it was performed at the beginning of the twenty-first century, can be projected back in time, or how stable or flexible it was at any given point in history. What does seem obvious, however, is that political changes have always entailed the reworking of Nepalese rulers' rituals and that, as a general rule, the rituals involved seem to have grown in complexity. By taking over ritual roles from the Mallas, inheriting others from their forefathers, by adding new ones, as well as by introducing new elements and specialists, the Shah kings, as heads of their lineage and principal worshippers of the realm, were surrounded by (maybe at times trapped in, at others protected by) a very complex web of ritual obligations. Moreover, throughout their history the rituals involved, and with them the deities and specialists, have achieved ever wider impact, for example, from addressing the inhabitants of the city of Kathmandu, to being relevant for the citizens of Nepal. For example, they began to permeate public life in a new way when, starting under King Mahendra (ruled 1951–72), and most prominently under his son Birendra (ruled 1972–2001), the annual as well as the life-cycle rituals of the royals were aired on radio and, from 1985, on TV throughout the country.

What could be a proper generic term for these public performances that constantly acquired new meanings and settings? Should one speak of royal, state, or national rituals? Should they be called rituals at all or state functions? Must one distinguish between rituals (or those parts thereof) in which the king represented his lineage, those in which he acted as premier ritual agent of his realm or of the nation, and those in which he acted in other capacities (such as, as Commander-in-Chief of the Army)? To be sure, these questions hardly made any sense to the Shah rulers, who benefited from the confluence of many roles in their persons and from the multivalence of these festivities, from the fact that they were 'total social facts', to use a Maussian expression. The close entanglement and near-identity of king and country was part of the official ideology and rhetoric.²⁶

²⁶ This does not broach the issue of how far this official rhetoric was believed by the people. Whereas Burghart at least finds some evidence in historical material for its effectiveness and says that "the ritual symbolism of

The public performance and propagation of royal rituals, and especially their being state affairs, started being a problem only when the Nepalese king and the concept of kingship in general came under attack.

Royal Rituals After the End of Monarchy

Public protests against his assumption of absolute power in February 2005 led King Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah to reinstate parliament in April 2006. He was gradually stripped of his executive rights and titles until the formal declaration of a republic at the end of 2007 and its full implementation in May 2008. The loss of the monarch's political powers went along with a gradual seizing of his ritual privileges. As Anne Mocko has impressively reconstructed in her thesis *Demoting Vishnu* (2012),²⁷ the strategies for dealing with royal rituals were negotiated between the interim government and ritual actors on a personal and day-to-day basis; they were not decided by any official decree. By the end of the interim period many of the king's ritual roles had been shifted to the new head of state: first to the prime minister, then, from the middle of 2008 onwards, to the newly created post of president. What was adopted was largely the same model for recasting rituals—replacement of the old head of state by the new one—that had already been successfully applied by the early Shahs over 200 years earlier.

After April 2006 the King was still a full-fledged monarch, even if he was barred from the executive functions of government. Yet, since all oppositional forces had been united against him for over a year, he hardly left the palace and so remained almost invisible. In this situation the new government feared that publicly performed royal rituals could go wrong. At this time the main challenge would not be posed

the auspicious body of the king and the identity of king and realm still persist in native belief, but have lost their power to influence the believers. The pomp goes on, but there was a time when the pomp was also powerful" (2008: 224). Mocko holds that under Gyanendra it was the king who was "the monarchy's one absolute believer" (2012: 18).

²⁷ Unless otherwise indicated, in the present section I will draw on this publication. Now see also Mocko (2016).

by potential ritual mistakes, but by people being unwilling to tolerate the presence of the monarch in the rituals of their 'new Nepal'. None the less, the government allowed the royals to continue to carry out their ritual roles. Following talks with the major political actors and under tight security arrangements, the royal family was present for the Bhoto festival of Red Matsyendranath in Patan on 6 June 2006 and observed the rest of that year's ritual protocol. Except for some mild protests, everything appeared to be business as usual. It was noteworthy, however, that the new government and the international community of diplomats withdrew their personal support for the King's ritual activities. As the sole representative of the government, the Minister of Education and Sport joined the royal couple on stage for the Bhoto festival. Likewise, the King's balcony in the old palace overlooking Basantapur, which in previous years had been densely populated by VIP politicians and foreign delegates, remained almost empty when the Kumari procession set forth on 6 September 2006. Since the King was no more Commander-in-Chief of the Army, he did not attend the military welcoming of the Phulpati at the parade ground.²⁸ Furthermore, he could no longer expect or force government and army officials to receive his blessing mark on the forehead on the tenth day of the Dasain festival.

By the time the Interim Constitution was promulgated (January 2007), which officially stripped the king of all power and designated the prime minister as head of the state,²⁹ the people's opinion towards the royals' appearance in public seems to have changed. The Pashupatinath incident during the festival of Shivaratri (16 February

²⁸ Mocko (2012: 425–6) reports that the king still attended the parade in 2006. Bloggers, however, record the king's non-attendance and applauded it (see, for example, <http://blog.com.np/2006/09/30/dashain-holiday-bad-news-from-police-good-news-from-army-and-prms-optimism-2/#more-3400>; accessed 10 May 2013).

²⁹ §159 (Arrangements regarding the head of the state) is the pertinent paragraph. In the third amendment (December 2007) it stated that: "3a The Prime Minister shall conduct all the functions of the head of the state until the republic is implemented" (Interim Constitution 2010). With the creation of the post of the President from the fourth amendment (May 2008) these provisional regulations were again removed.

2007), when the King's car was hit by stones thrown from the waiting crowd, supplied the government with an argument to start substituting the king in royal rituals. About the same time the Maoists began to take the removal of the royals from public space into their own hands: they vandalized or destroyed statues of the Shah kings (Toffin 2008: 170–1).

Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala had already acted as Commander-in-Chief of the army in military parades on the Tundikhel. The first time he acted as the premier ritual patron (*yajamāna*) of the state came in May 2007, when the statue of the god Bhimeshwara of Dolakha started sweating. The sweat of this particular deity has traditionally been taken as an ill omen for king and country. At that time, it was not yet clear in which public functions the prime minister would replace the king and both their offices were informed. Accordingly, two rituals of appeasement were carried out at the temple, one ordered by King Gyanendra and the other by Prime Minister Koirala. The publicity test for the new arrangement came with the Bhoto festival, in which the Prime Minister acted in place of the King for the first time in front of the people. When this replacement was received well by the general public, though not without ridicule and criticism,³⁰ the substitution of the prime minister for the king was applied to all subsequent ritual events.

And yet, not everything went as the government would have wished, especially where the organizers' opinions about how to treat the rituals differed from the official line. Notably, the caretakers of the royal Kumari allowed for a double performance. Thus, in 2007 the Kumari first received the Prime Minister, then the King, who—to the dismay of the government and without taking prior permission—sneaked in when the ritual seemed to be over. Moreover, the living goddess applied the blessing mark on the forehead according to rule, that is, with the left hand, to the King only; the Prime Minister

³⁰ Ridicule heard in the streets of Kathmandu referred to PM Koirala, here acting in a ritual function of the king, as having gone mad, even thinking himself to have become the king of Nepal. For a critical comment on Koirala's attendance, calling for the secular state to keep out of the religious sphere, see S. Sharma's guest column 'Unceremonial Monarchy', published in the *Nepali Times* (Sharma 2007).

received it from her right hand. The Dasain celebrations posed yet another problem, as it was not altogether clear where to substitute the King. In which parts did he act as head of his lineage and in which did he represent the nation? Given these ambivalences and the lack of legally binding regulation of the matter, the first President of Nepal, Ram Baran Yadav, who took over the king's roles after his appointment on 23 July 2008, did not face an easy task.³¹

This is the point from which I wish to proceed. In her thesis Mocko's concern is to show how the substitution of the king by the new head of the state served to demote the office of the king. While her focus lies on the successful strategy by which the interim government "effectively prevented him [the King] from reproducing his royalty" (2012: 3) and "attacked his social identity as king" (2012: 4), I will dwell rather on the implications of this strategy for the secular state and will look at the criticisms raised against this model. What seemed to be an established arrangement by the end of the interim period, on closer examination turns out to have been contested.

The president's role is questioned as to the legitimacy of stepping into the ritual shoes of the king. A president, as a representative of the democratic system, lacks the character of a king as a consecrated body and human god. Therefore, he cannot possess the same ability to bless the people by his very presence. Should he none the less be allowed to carry out the role of the realm's premier ritual patron? And, if he does so, how does this fit the Nepalese concept of secularism? As

³¹ Among the first occasions for the president to act in place of the king were the presiding over the Bhoto festival (26 July 2008) and the confirmation of the appointment of the newly installed Kumari of Kathmandu on the eighth day of Dasain (7 October 2008). It should be added that not all royal religious duties were shifted to the head of the secular state and not all at once. The distribution of alms to ascetics on Shivaratri was taken over by the Guthi Samsthan starting from 2008. Judging from photos published in the internet, the introduction of the Phulpati in Hanuman Dhoka seems to take place without the President. Until 2007 the jar procession from Changu Narayan to Kathmandu was still brought to the king's residence. It was only starting in August 2008 that it was received by the new Head of State, then in the President's office (<http://abhasdr.blogspot.de/2008/08/changu-narayan-jatra-observed-in.html>); for more on this procession and its history, see Vajracharya 1976: 167–8).

shown above, the substitution of the old by the new ruler is based on royal conquest. Is this pattern really appropriate to mark the fact that the very institution of monarchy has itself come to an end?

Moreover, the former monarch, who throughout his short reign presented himself as a devout Hindu king (Hausner 2007; Letizia 2013), seems to have tried to contest his removal from key positions in rituals. Though he has neither directly opposed official decisions, nor actively interfered with the activities of the president, he has maintained—as far as permitted (that is, depending on access granted to ritual space and on the willingness of the actors)—a kind of parallel ritual infrastructure. As when receiving the Kumari's blessing in 2007, in some other cases too Gyanendra Shah has arrived at a given place of worship after the departure of the president and has (re-) performed the rites; if questioned, he has appealed to his right to religious freedom as a Nepalese citizen.³² Looking at media reports, these double performances, as well as the former king's presence in other religious rituals and public functions, leave the impression of a ritual equilibrium between President and former monarch, or at least of the latter's venture to maintain parts of his once royal body through ritual. The usual rhetorical figure Gyanendra Shah resorts to when questioned about his ambitions to return to power is to delegate this decision to the people's will, but to signal his readiness to do so. In July 2012 he was cited in news reports from Nepal, India, and Europe as being willing to return as king in a "largely ceremonial role."³³

THE SWORD PROCESSION OF PACALI BHAIRAVA

Each of the royal rituals has its own performative, historical, and textual background, but the Sword Procession (*khadgasiddhijātrā*, lit.

³² Thus, in 2010 he visited the Janaki temple on Ram Navami (Letizia 2012: 67, 100) and was prevented by the government from attending a function in honour of former Kumaris (Zotter 2016: 244). Public ritual activities that were once part of the royal ceremonial schedule, however, seem to have diminished. At least for the period after 2010, I am only aware of news reports on Gyanendra Shah visiting Pashupati on Shivaratri, and goddess temples on the eighth day of Dasain. Moreover, he still distributes blessings to the public on the tenth day of Dasain and on the occasion of his birthday.

³³ See, for example, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-18743394>.

'procession for [the acquisition of] the success of the sword') of Pacali Bhairava brings out points of relevance for the whole set. It concerns a performance at a moment of the annual cycle that is decisive for the celebration of human and divine rule—on the climactic day of the Durga Puja festival known as the Victorious Tenth (Vijayadashami). It features an object epitomizing concepts of Hindu kingship, a deity of royal character, and the presence of different human rulers. Furthermore, and important in the present context, it was, as far as I can see, the first incident in which the procedure for a ritual was markedly adapted to cope with the changed political reality rather than simply substituting president for king.³⁴ Accordingly, heated discussions surrounded the event.³⁵

The Ritual and Its History

Twice every twelve years³⁶ the Nepalese king used to participate in a ritual said to bring about *khadgasiddhi*, 'success of the sword', which

³⁴ The Kumari's blessing of the secular head of state with the right instead of the left hand may actually be called the very first alteration of this type. It was, however, not perceived as such. Almost nobody seems to have realized the procedure had been changed (Mocko 2012: 389).

³⁵ For these discussions I rely on its coverage in Newari and Nepali media. I have not interviewed the actors personally.

³⁶ The procession of Pacali Bhairava follows a cycle of twelve years. After a break of four years the same ritual is performed with the main deity being Bhadrakali, Pacali Bhairava's wife. Whereas in the procession of her husband Bhadrakali wears a red mask, her face is blue when she takes the lead. According to the speaker of the organizing committee (B. Mali 2012), the Sword Procession of 2011 was held after 13 years, because the previous performance in 1998 had been irregularly arranged after 11 years by order of the palace. Before that, too, the ritual seems to have followed an eleven-year rather than the twelve-year cycle claimed. The attested performances for Pacali Bhairava are: 3 October 1976—Gutschow (1982: 200 n. 184) gives the year as 1977, but in 1977 Vijayadashami fell on the 21 and 22 October, whereas 3 October 1976 fits the date; second October 1987 (Visuvalingam and Chalier-Visuvalingam 2004); 1998 (B. Mali 2012). Performances for Bhadrakali are recorded for: 18 October 1991 (van den Hoek 2004); *2002—there must have been one exchange with King Gyanendra, as there is a picture of him receiving the sword from Bhadrakali (cover of K. Shrestha 2008); 22 October 2015.

is one of the special achievements (*siddhi*) of Tantric practice.³⁷ At least in the Nepalese context this term seems to be taken in a much broader sense than just being related to a person's invulnerability in war. Current interpretations tend towards seeing it as a regular renewal of the ruler's relation with his *shakti*, as a kind of recharging of his capacity to rule his realm.³⁸

The ritual in question is called a procession (*jātrā*) or, alternatively, the 'dance of the Gardeners' (Nw. Gathu Pyākham).³⁹ In addition to the dancing Gathus (also called Malakara or Mali), their Vajracharya domestic priest also plays a central role.⁴⁰ Like their caste fellows elsewhere in the Valley, the Gardeners embody a group of deities, collectively called the Nine Durga troupe (*nava-durgā-gaṇa*).⁴¹ The divine troupe is headed by Pacali Bhairava and his consort Bhadrakali and is connected to the aniconic 'seats' (*pīṭhas*) of these two deities, which are very important for the ritual construction of urban space,

³⁷ *Khadgasiddhi* was reckoned as the first in classical lists of eight (*aṣṭasiddhi*) in Tantric literature (see, for example, Davidson 2002: 201). The exclamation *khaḍgasiddhir astu*, 'May there be success of the sword', occurs frequently in ritual handbooks from the Malla period. It is found in the formulas of ritual commitment (*saṃkalpa*), as statements of rewards (*phalaśruti*), or as a variant of the usual concluding formula *siddhir astu*, "may (it) be success(ful)"; for example, *Deśabalividhi* (NGMPP A 240/2): *khaḍgasiddhir astu śubham*. Often the Mallas are specified as receivers of *khaḍgasiddhi*; for example, *Durgāprāsādakampanaśāntibalividhi* (A 239/17, Fol. 89b.): *śrīśrījaya bhūpatīndramalladevasya khaḍgasiddhir astu*; *Kubjikāgnivarṣavardhanakotyāhu tiyājñavidhi* (A 234/4): *rājādhirājaparamēśvaraparamabhaṭṭārakāya śrī 3 amukamalladevasya khaḍgasiddhir astu* (see respective entries at: <http://catalogue.ngmcp.uni-hamburg.de/wiki/>).

³⁸ A good example is the exegesis by Indra Mali (2012): the king's *khaḍgasiddhi* does not only protect his realm against attacks, but also against poverty and illnesses in general, while also promoting peace and welfare.

³⁹ The ritual has been treated by Gutschow (1982: 137–9), van den Hoek (2004: 81–106), Toffin (1993: 67–72), and Visuvalingam & Chalier-Visuvalingam (2004: 136–41).

⁴⁰ By contrast, the Gathus of Bhaktapur have a Brahman domestic priest.

⁴¹ The Nava Durga troupes usually consist of the group of Mother Goddesses surrounding the respective urban fabric together with Ganesha, Simhini, Vyaghrini, and one or more Bhairavas/Shivas.

especially so for lower Kathmandu. The Gathus' activities start four days before Gatha Mugah Fourteenth (the dark fourteenth of the month of Shravan) with the 'giving of areca nuts and coins' (Nw. *gvaydām biyegu*) as an invitation to the king and worship at the *pīṭha*. Roughly two months later the main events take place on the ninth and tenth day of the Dasain festival. The masks are taken from the painter's house; a fire sacrifice is performed at the *pīṭha*; the deities are raised from their aniconic seats and are transferred to their human vessels and masks. After elaborate esoteric rituals at the *pīṭha* during the night of Vijayadashami the sword of either Pacali Bhairava or Bhadrakali receives special treatment from the Vajracharya priest before it is taken up by the deity.⁴² Driven by the sound of the Gathus' music and accompanied by his consort and *gaṇa*, the deity proceeds to the centre of town. There the divine troupe encounters another sword-carrying troupe arriving from the Hanuman Dhoka palace. The main sword of the latter procession was handed over to the Shah King,⁴³ who arrived from his residential palace Narayanhiti, and, under the supervision of the Gathus' domestic priest, he exchanged the royal sword for the deities three times back and forth.⁴⁴ Over the next roughly nine and a half months after this initial ritual, the deities dance at thirty-three different places in and around Kathmandu (Figure 8.2; cf. Gutschow 1982: 134) before they die a ritual death, their masks being cremated at a cremation ground.

Before dealing with what happened in the Pacali Bhairava Sword Procession of 2011, we should consider how the ritual may have looked in the past and what it might have meant to earlier kings. Admittedly, not much is known about the historical development of the ritual. The Gathus (B. Mali 2012; I. Mali 2012) hold that Ratna,

⁴² See note 36.

⁴³ Remarkably this, as far as I can see, was the only occasion on which a Shah King actually performed a ritual with a Malla King's sword in his hand.

⁴⁴ The sword exchange with Bhadrakali takes place at the Simha Dhoka of Makhan Tol the one with Pacali Bhairava in front of the Kasthamandapa (Maru). K. Shrestha (2008: 47) quotes Taleju's main priest (*mūnāyo*) Uddhav Karmacharya as saying that the two stones on which the deities stand on these occasions are regarded as the main 'guardians of the field' (*kṣetrapāla*), known as the Uttarāyaṇa- and Dakṣiṇāyaṇakṣetrapāla respectively.



Figure 8.2 The Gathu Pyakhan dance is performed at thirty-three places in and around Kathmandu, for example, in Naxal Chardhunge. Pacali Bhairava (right) is distinguished by his large blue face. In between the dances, the deities rest. People of all generations assemble to see and worship the divine troupe.

Source: A. Zotter, 10 March 2012.

first Malla King of Kantipur,⁴⁵ re-established the dance that had originally been inaugurated by the Thakuri ruler Gunakamadeva, to whom the foundation of Kathmandu is ascribed.⁴⁶ Of course this could be a purely legitimatory claim, but there are other kings of the Thakuri dynasty who populate the myth and ritual of the deities in question. The Thaku Juju (Nw. 'Thakuri King'), the ceremonial king of lower Kathmandu, regularly worships Pacali Bhairava and is the patron of

⁴⁵ According to van den Hoek (2004: 93), the Gathu elder's records mention Ratna Malla as the one who established the ritual. The chronicles have Amara Malla introduce the dance without mentioning the *khadgasiddhi* ritual (see, for example, Sharma 1968–9 II: 8; Wright 1877: 205).

⁴⁶ According to the chronicles Gunakamadeva was ordered by the Goddess Mahalakshmi in a dream to lay out a city in the form of a sword.

his annual festival. He traces his ancestry not only back to the Thakuri rulers in general, but to King Pacali of Pharping (van den Hoek 2004: 63–4). This latter ruler, it is said, turned into Pacali Bhairava⁴⁷ now worshipped south of the old city (Figure 8.3) while his wife became Bhadrakali, worshipped in the south-east corner of the city.⁴⁸ Though



Figure 8.3 Pacali Bhairava is worshipped in an open air shrine south of the old city of Kathmandu. His seat under a *pipal* tree is enclosed by a brazen cover. In front of Bhairava lies his 'vehicle' (*vahana*) Vetala, a spirit inhabiting corpses.

Source: A. Zotter, 27 March 2013.

⁴⁷ For the deity, his temple, and rituals, see Anderson (1971: 156–63), Visuvalingam and Chalier-Visuvalingam (2004), Gutschow (1982: 136–9), van den Hoek (2004: 61–106), Pradhan (1986: 304–7).

⁴⁸ In the Kathmandu *maṇḍala* of eight protective Mother Goddesses Bhadrakali (Lumari Ajima) occupies the south-east (van den Hoek 2004: 5). In the chroniclers' accounts on King Gunakamadeva's founding of the city, however, among the protective deities at the four cardinal points Pacali Bhairava is aroused in the south and Bhadrakali in the east. For more on Kathmandu's sacred topography, see Gutschow (1982: 108–47) and van den Hoek (2004: 1–19).

the Thaku Juju plays only a minor role in the Sword Festival,⁴⁹ his presence hints at the prominent role the divine couple heading the dancing troupe may have played in royal rituals before the advent of Malla rule in the late fifteenth century. If one were allowed to speculate a bit further, the Sword Procession may have been taken over by the Mallas from the earlier rulers, or they, when taking the throne of Kathmandu, may have absorbed royal deities of earlier rulers by engaging them in their Nava Durga dance practices. With the inclusion of these deities as part of the divine retinue of their own tutelary goddess, Taleju, brought in from Bhaktapur and newly established in the palace, the Malla rulers may have been able to legitimize their goddess within the given local ritual infrastructure while at the same time subordinating to her the royal deities of the previous dynasty.

In order to track the significance of the Sword Procession in the Malla period, it is instructive to consider how it is embedded in the larger context of the autumnal Navaratra celebrations. The sword exchange is staged on the Victorious Tenth (Vijayādaśamī, Nw. Cālām), the climactic day of the Dasain festival, the day commonly associated with the victory of Durga over the buffalo demon as well as with the victory of Rama, the paragon of righteous human rule in the epics, over Ravana. In accordance with pan-Indian practices of ritually going into battle that very day the Newars' ritual culture features Sword Processions (Nw. Khadgajātrā, Pāyah/Pāyā), carried out, for example, in individual households, in Buddhist monasteries, or at the temples of the Mother Goddesses of Kathmandu, and said to bestow *khadgasiddhi*.⁵⁰ In these Khadgajatras the swords established on the Eighth day of the festival and worshipped throughout the following days are taken out on procession. In the Malla period, these processions must have formed one of the main events of the whole festival complex.⁵¹

⁴⁹ According to Visuvalingam and Chaliier-Visuvalingam (2004: 127), he held the king's fan; others speak of his mere presence.

⁵⁰ Gellner (1992: 314), van den Hoek (2004: 115–19), van den Hoek and Shrestha (1992: 210–13), Juju and Shrestha (1985: 51–7), Pradhan (1986: 300–1, map III after p. 313), K. Shrestha (2008: 42–6).

⁵¹ Gellner (1992: 379 n. 9), Vajracharya (1976: 185). In fact, *cālām*, the modern Newari name for the day, goes back to Classical Newari *cāraṇa*

Similar to the performances in the households and city quarters, processions were also carried out at the Malla courts in the late evening of the Victorious Tenth.⁵² In these rituals the source of *khadgasiddhi* was the Mallas' tutelary deity in her form as a sword. After empowerment, the King⁵³ and his courtiers marched forth from the palace with their swords. What is still observed annually in the other two Malla palaces bears striking similarity to the twice twelve-yearly Sword Procession of Pacali Bhairava/Bhadrakali. In Bhaktapur the local Nava Durga troupe arrives at the palace in the night of the Victorious Tenth, receives *mantrasiddhi*, alternatively called *khadgasiddhi*, by embracing the 'sword-god' (Nw. *pāyāḍyaḥ*) brought from the inner palace, and then sets out on procession together with the *pāyāḍyaḥ* (P. Shrestha 2003: 59–65). In that way power is "transferred by Taleju to the Nine Durgās, who will use it to protect Bhaktapur during the following nine months" (Levy 1990: 525). In the Mulchok of Patan as well, a

(related to the Skt. root *car*, to go, to wander around), and *carana* is what the Sword Procession is called in the journals (also known as *thyāsaphus*) and Navaratra handbooks of the Malla period; e.g. NGMPP A 1234/26 (written in NS 814 under King Jitimitra Malla) starts *navarātrayā cāraṇavidhir likhyate*, "the ritual directions for the wandering around (i.e. for the procession on the Victorious Tenth) of the Navaratra (festival) are written down (in the following)". As a support for his suggestion that the practice of the Sword Procession "seems to go back at least to the thirteenth century", Gellner (1999: 147) refers to Petech's (1984: 95) citation of the colophon of a manual called *Khadgapūjāvidhi* (Cambridge University Library Add. 1706.1), dated to Vijayadashami 1271. However, inspection of this handbook shows that its topic is a Buddhist Sword Worship (*khadgapūjā*) directed at Trailokyavijaya, to be carried out in the bright half of the month of Ashvin. Thus it remains to be ascertained how far this ritual is related to Newar Buddhist practices carried out on the Victorious Tenth.

⁵² K. Shrestha (2008: 38–42); for Kathmandu, see van den Hoek and Shrestha (1992: 211–13), Pradhan (1986: 311–12), Vajracharya (1976: 187–8); for Bhaktapur and Patan, see below.

⁵³ Probably royal initiation practices were interwoven with the reception of *khadgasiddhi*. K. Shrestha (2008: 41–2) quotes a *bahi* document (NGMPP B 515/28) to the effect that the kings of Bhaktapur took Tantric initiation (*dikṣā*) on the Victorious Tenth in the central courtyard of the palace, took up the sword, and then participated in the Sword Procession.

Sword Procession of former royal courtiers is formed that night (Toffin 1996: 66–7). On that occasion, the custodian of the Patan kings' sword enters the Taleju temple for special worship before the procession sets out from the palace (personal communication of Bhaiya Lal Manandhar, 10 March 2013). There too, the royal Sword Procession meets a Nava Durga troupe, the one from the village of Theco, ritual interaction taking place between the Nava Durgas and the main divine image of the royal Sword Procession (Toffin 1996: 76–8).

Given the parallel in its personal and ritual syntax, as well as the central role of the Gathus' domestic priest, the royal Sword Procession and exchange of Kathmandu, commonly interpreted as Pacali Bhairava's or Bhadrakali's bestowal of *khadgasiddhi* to the king, can also be read as the initial empowerment of the Nava Durga troupe by the central *shakti* of the realm having been made present in the sword the king carries, or, as two intersecting *khadgasiddhis*, from which the king as the central broker of divine power profited. The story quoted above of Prithvi Narayan receiving blessings from the Nava Durga troupe instead of Ranjit Malla could hint at a similar construction at Bhaktapur in Malla time. Even if, on the basis of the material available so far, the historical performance cannot be reconstructed in detail, it is safe to conclude that the twice twelve-yearly Sword Procession of Pacali Bhairava/Bhadrakali was a centrally important royal ritual for the Malla kings of Kathmandu.

What happened following the Shah conquest of Kathmandu? According to the Gathus (B. Mali 2012; I. Mali 2012), the ritual was not performed by Prithvi Narayan, and was made part of royal ceremonial protocol again only under his grandson Rana Bahadur Shah. Interestingly, there are reports about Prithvi Narayan receiving *khadgasiddhi* in Varanasi prior of his invasion of Kathmandu Valley (Acharya 1978: 141–3). The story commonly told of the Gorkhali King performing a ritual to acquire *khadgasiddhi*, and afterwards being given a sword by an ascetic, exemplifies the pan-Indian topos of a founder of a dynasty being given a conquering sword by a goddess or a yogi.⁵⁴ Moreover it mirrors a story told about Prithvi Narayan's

⁵⁴ Sanderson (2007: 288–91) discusses examples from Sanskrit narrative literature and historical incidents: for example, Shivaji (1627–60), founder of the Maratha dynasty, is said to have received a sword from his lineage goddess, Tulaja Bhavani, and Jayasthiti Malla of Nepal is said to have received one from Maneshvari.

predecessor in the palace of Kathmandu. Jaya Prakash Malla is said to have received *khadgasiddhi* and a sword from a yogi at the Guhyeshvari temple (I. Mali 2012; Sharma 1968–9 III: 11). Through these mirror stories the two kings again appear like alter egos between whom, in the last instance, the *shakti* of the realm has to choose.

In the present state of knowledge it is impossible to say why (if indeed it is really so) Prithvi Narayan did not include the Sword Procession in his ceremonial schedule, as he did with other Malla rituals. Was it a conscious decision on his part or did the Newar specialists exclude him? Even though I have not been able to trace any source connecting the discontinuity of the Sword Procession of Kathmandu with the story of Prithvi Narayan going to Varanasi, this popular story may have had an important function: by drawing on a translocal and prestigious source of power his claims to rulership could be presented as superior to those of the Mallas.⁵⁵

Reshaping the Ritual Procedure

For the first time after the end of monarchy the Sword Procession of Pacali Bhairava was performed in VS 2068 (2011). In light of the fact that the ritual had been discontinued under Prithvi Narayan, the Gathus discussed for more than a year in advance whether under the new political circumstances the ritual should continue at all and if so how (B. Mali 2012). After consulting the elders, Gurus (that is, their Vajracharya priests), and the Taleju priests, the members of the *guthi* decided to stage the ritual, but to mark the political change not by substituting president for king, but by means of a more thorough alteration of traditional procedure. The president would only witness

⁵⁵ The fact that the revival of the Sword Procession is attributed to Rana Bahadur's reign is entirely consistent with historical evidence that Rana Bahadur was particularly interested in Newar cultural idioms: it was in his reign that the last significant contributions to the architectural ensemble of Hanuman Dhoka palace in Newar style, such as the mask of Seto Bhairava, were made (Slusser 1992: 198–9). Moreover, it fits the pattern of Jaya Prakash and Prithvi Narayan being presented as alter egos in the narrative traditions of the Kathmandu Valley, because the dynastic chronicles hold that Jaya Prakash Malla at his abdication promised to be reincarnated as Prithvi Narayan's grandson (see, for example, Wright 1877: 257–8), that is, as Rana Bahadur.

the ritual, as the Thaku Juju does; the god in the form of the possessed dancer would exchange swords, not with a person (the king/president) but would simply take up the royal sword kept on a ritual 'seat' (*āsana*).⁵⁶ In this way the question, with whom the sword should be exchanged, could be left open. The final decision of the matter was postponed to the time when there would be a constitutional regulation. This decision was made public at a press conference on 12 July 2011.

President Ram Baran Yadav was, however, ritually invited in the same manner as the king had been and accepted the *gvaydām* standing in the Nasal Chok of the old Hanuman Dhoka palace at the end of July 2011 (Amalekh 2011).⁵⁷ When finally the Procession was performed on Vijayadashami (6 October) the Thaku Juju stood in his proper place, the Malla King's sword was brought from the palace, but the President did not turn up. His non-attendance was announced by phone at the last minute and blamed on his busy schedule. There were different speculations as to the real reasons for this cancellation. When asked whether the President did not attend because he was denied the king's role, Bharat Mali (2012) presumed that it may also have played a role that he had been criticized for only participating in Hindu rituals. Mocko (2012: 463–4) interprets the withdrawal of the President, which was preceded by repeated public announcements that he did not wish to take part, as the first step in slowly withdrawing from 'royal' ritual duties. Another explanation was offered in a conversation I had in March 2013 with the Vajracharya priest officiating at Pacali Bhairava's *pīṭha*. According to him the President had seen Pacali Bhairava in a dream, whereupon astrologers advised him not to attend the ritual, otherwise he would die.

As we can see, the President's sparse statements (and the palace's complete silence) on the matter contrasted with many-voiced

⁵⁶ Other sources reported that the royal sword was placed on the ground, so the term *āsana* could refer not to a physically present seat or throne, but to a diagram customarily drawn on the floor as 'seat' for deities or ritual vessels. In 2015 it was reported that the throne of the Malla kings had been brought from the Taleju temple so that the sword could be placed on it.

⁵⁷ The day reported corresponds to the eleventh of the dark fortnight of Shravan.

discussions within Newar society that accompanied the whole ritual process. Arguments concentrated on the Gathus' decision not to give the role of the King to the President, taking this to be of concern for the importance of Newar culture as a whole. Good examples of two opposing voices are the contributions by Chunda Vajracharya (2011)⁵⁸ and Naresh Bir Shakya (2011)⁵⁹ in the *Sandhya Times*. Both have the preservation and promotion of Newar culture in mind, but this leads them to make contrasting arguments. Whereas Vajracharya sees the Gathus' step as contributing to the decline of Newar culture, because it downgrades its national significance, Shakya judges it to be a step towards the uplift of Newar culture and speaks of regaining self-esteem. Likewise, whereas Vajracharya states that the *shakti* of the realm can and must be used in the interest of the nation by transferring it through the ritual to the President, Shakya warns that if the *shakti* is further put into service of politicians who misuse their participation in rituals to demonstrate status and power, it will eventually be spoilt. Remarkably, both intellectuals refer to the story of Prithvi Narayan Shah's 'conquest by ritual'. As might be expected by now, Shakya takes it as the beginning of a long story of oppression and dominance of Newar traditions, whereas Vajracharya interprets it as a sign of the Gorkhali king's respect for the very same rituals. The latter author employs another familiar narrative in her argument. She holds that Prithvi Narayan was actually compelled to take the blessing from the Kumari in order to overthrow Jaya Prakash, because the latter had received *khadgasiddhi* from Guhyeshvari and could not, therefore, be defeated in battle.

The new procedure, adopted and explained by the specialists to advance a neutral standpoint on the question of who should be the righteous receiver of the *khadgasiddhi*, is interpreted in a number of ways (as is probably the case for any successful ritual). It is either

⁵⁸ Vajracharya is a professor at Tribhuvan University. In the court case on the Living Goddess/Kumari, brought by 'modernizers' who sought to protect the human rights of the girls chosen, Vajracharya was one of the main opponents seeking to 'protect Newar culture' (Letizia 2013).

⁵⁹ Shakya is a well-known activist in the Nepal Bhasha movement. He was also a candidate for the Nepal Rastriya Party in the Constituent Assembly elections of 2013.

mourned as the beginning of the end of Newar culture or greeted as advancing the self-respect and independence of Newar culture. A third interpretation, variously reported, reads the keeping of the sword on a ritual seat as waiting for the king to return (see, for example, Apsara 2011). An alternative solution suggested was to exchange swords with the Thaku Juju, as he would be the ceremonial head of the postulated future federal region of Kathmandu (Apsara 2011).

Interestingly, in these discussions of the Sword Procession, old patterns of narration, in which rulers communicated with deities, are carried over almost seamlessly into the new political system. The president is placed in a direct line with Prithvi Narayan Shah and even receives nocturnal warnings from a deity. These vivid discussions also attest to the enduring importance of ritual in processes of identity-building in Newar society. Remarkably, the Sword Procession is reframed in terms of recent arguments about ethnicity. Either by engaging the theme of the glories of Newar culture (Gellner 2011: 55f.) and denouncing its oppression by the Parbatiyas or by stressing the continuing central position of Newar festivals in the ritual repertoire of the Nepalese state, a traditional ruler-focused ritual can be claimed as a kind of ethnic Newar property.⁶⁰ While other examples of rituals being central in building ethnic identity (see Chapters 9 and 10 by Holmberg and Gaenszle, respectively) feature the creation of new ritual forms and spaces, what we see here is the affirmation of ethnic identity by means of the reinterpretation and reclamation of agency on the part of ritual specialists.

THE QUESTION OF STATE RITUALS

Ousting the monarch from his public ritual practices has been a convincing and so far successful measure to unmake the king. As Mocko (2012) has argued, putting another person in his stead made manifest and embodied the official statement that he is not as special and divine as royalist rhetoric claims. The substitution of the king by

⁶⁰ Here I abstain from dwelling on conflicts within the Newar community. For example, most of the music groups refused to attend the *gwendam biye* ceremony in protest against the invitation of the president in place of the king (Amalekh 2011).

the new head of the state, however, only contested the figure of the king, while adding a new layer of significance to formerly royal rituals, on top of the layer the Shah rulers established when they seized the position of the realm's principal worshippers from the defeated Malla kings.

There is, however, a major difference between the republican and the earlier royal recasting of the ruler-centred rituals. In the time of monarchical rule, new kings were always seen to adapt the rituals to their visions and versions of what is called Hinduism. In contrast, the secular state officially does not promote any particular religion, and thus the president is only left with the options of attending or not attending the rituals. Beyond the granting or not-granting of funding, the state is not in a position to actively interfere with or change ritual procedures. Moreover, the involvement of the new head of state entails the reduction of the polyvalency of the practices. One could even draw the paradoxical conclusion that it was the secular state that finally and completely transformed royal rituals into state rituals. By sending its prime representative to act in Hindu rituals the government of a secular state reaffirms the value of this particular set of rituals.

I suspect that the decision to substitute the king was not the result of a carefully formulated or discussed policy. It seems more likely that it was outcome of an internalized pattern, that is, of conforming to what national mythology dictated: the righteous ruler of the state must be annually re-asserted in rituals. Seizing the place in front of the Kumari and in other public performances is perceived as vital to implement legitimate human rulership. Rather than trying to create new national myths and rituals, the functionaries of the new state kept on re-enacting the old ruler-focused master narrative and thereby updated it.

Moreover, the force of the rituals themselves should not be underestimated. Ascribing their continuity to the eagerness of specialists to maintain their privileged positions in state practices would only be half the truth. Rituals continue to be considered as valid means of coping with the world. Deities that had been at the core of the polity for centuries do not cease to exist when the state is declared secular. That is why it is not so surprising that "what has never been seriously proposed is that the elaborate system of rituals which formerly

supported the monarchy should simply be discontinued" (Mocko 2012: 454).

To be sure, accommodating the public performance of Hindu rituals in a secular republic contradicts one widely accepted interpretation of secularism, which is supposed to feature a total separation of religion and state. But as Letizia has shown (Chapter 2, 2013), the Nepalese concept of secularism is still in the making and tends to coalesce around the provision of equal rights to all religions, including equal access to public space:

The President's participation in the Kumari Jatra, his taking the king's place, is a powerful nonverbal gesture of visual rhetoric ... exposing to the nation some core elements of present-day Nepali secularism: eliminating the risk of the monarchy's return, not displacing religious institutions from the public sphere ..., acknowledging the use of religious tradition by the republic, and acknowledging the value of divine support to a new state in need of consolidation. (Letizia 2013: 42)

For the president, as ceremonial head of state there are fundamentally two ways to proceed. Either he may slowly withdraw from formerly royal rituals, justifying his participation as an interim solution, or, on the basis of equal rights policy, he may include performances of other religions in his schedule. And in fact these two opposing approaches seem to be the options discussed among the president's advisors (Mocko 2012: 446–7).

The ritual specialists are faced by a rather similar dilemma. They can either seek to exclude the presence of the state, which is risky in terms of funding and might lead directly to a loss of importance, as the pitiful state of many formerly royal practices shows. Or, on the other hand, they may continue to invite the president in the king's place, which is fine right now, and adds to the prestige of the event, but may lead to another problem often heard in discussions: What if in future a Christian or Muslim becomes president? Will he accept *prasad* from Hindu deities? To this one may provocatively add: What if a member of a group considered untouchable by the ritual specialists becomes president, will they offer *prasad* to him (or her)?

The decision taken and followed in the Sword Procession of Pacali Bhairava was advanced as an intelligent answer to this no-win situation; as far as possible the participants tried to avoid pitfalls. For the

first time a model was enacted implying that the foundation of Nepal as secular republic was not just another change of royal dynasties. In their novel scheme for performing a royal ritual without a king, the Gathus tried to maintain the presence of the state, but to relegate the president from central actor to VIP witness. This new pattern was articulated in the strong conviction that in this ritual the Tantric concept of power, of binding the *shakti* of the realm to a human ruler, is centrally enacted. But remarkably in the public discussions that followed, the issue was hardly raised whether the performance of a ritual based on the concept of the *shakti* as the major source of the ruler's ability to carry out his task, makes any sense in a democratic state based on the idea that it is the people with whom sovereignty lies. On the contrary, it was discussed how this power should be used in the national interest and how one could prevent it from being misused.

As with many other issues of Nepalese politics, it is not clear which way the formerly royal rituals will go. But maybe ritual practices as well as deities, with their long history of agency in Nepalese history, will not suddenly stop being active in today's political sphere. What is not to be expected, however, is that any easy solutions will result from the ongoing discussions. As Chapter 7 (Adhikari and Gellner) also illustrates, the accommodation and occasional confrontation of diverging ritual practices with the media coverage of the attendant debates is a broad trend observable in the contemporary Nepalese religious landscape. Probably more voices will be raised and multiple models will be proposed and put into practice. It may well be that the processes I have discussed in this chapter should be interpreted as the democratization of royal rituals.

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